

VITAMINS vs. DRUGS - Which is safer?

Donald C. Loomis of 132 Thorne Street, Jersey City, New Jersey 07307 has published some interesting findings in the January 1990 issue of the Townsend Letter for Doctors. All statistics are taken from data that originally appeared in issues of the *American Journal of Emergency Medicine*.

Fatalities Resulting from Poisonings by Vitamin Supplements in the United States

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Multiple Vitamins - Adult	0	0	0	0	0
Multiple Vitamins - Pediatric	0	0	0	0	0
Vitamin A	0	0	0	0	0
Pyridoxine - B6	0	0	0	0	0
Other B-Complex Vitamins	0	0	0	0	0
Vitamin C	0	0	0	0	0
Vitamin D	0	0	0	0	0
Vitamin E	0	0	0	0	0
Other/Unknown	0	0	0	0	1 *
 Total	 0	 0	 0	 0	 1

* The one possible occurrence in other/unknown category in 1987 was later found to be a reporting error in the original literature.

Fatalities Resulting from All Major Categories of Prescription and Non-Prescription Pharmaceutical Drugs (not including illegal drugs such as heroin or cocaine)

Categories of Drugs	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Analgesics (pain killers)	22	53	87	82	93
Antidepressants (mood elevators)	19	57	90	100	105
Asthma Therapies	4	10	11	21	16
Cardiovascular Drugs (including blood pressure medications)	5	18	21	50	52
Sedative/Hypnotics (sleeping pills & tranquilizers)	11	51	62	61	48
Amphetamines (stimulants)	1	4	6	11	11
 Total from above categories	 62	 193	 227	 325	 325

The total number of fatalities from major pharmaceutical categories for the five year reporting period from 1983 to 1987 equals 1,182. These statistics do not reflect the thousands of additional annual cases of intentional suicide by prescription and non-prescription drugs (such as sleeping pills), most of which are not currently reported to poison control centers. The total number of fatalities resulting from vitamin supplements over the same five year period was one reporting error. In relation to the total number of vitamin and pharmaceutical products consumed during this period, these statistics suggest that **vitamin supplements would appear to be approximately 1,200 times safer than drugs**.

However, the statistical trend would suggest that as more pharmaceutical poisonings are reported each year and additional data is gathered, several decades from now it can reasonably be projected, based upon the existing data, that vitamin supplements will ultimately be shown to be tens of thousands of times safer than drugs, or conversely, that drug products even when prescribed by physicians are tens of thousands of times more dangerous than vitamin supplements.